

# Review of: "The equality agenda: a clear case of smoke and mirrors"

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I enjoyed reading this paper. The issues addressed here are important and I find the autobiographical material contained in the article relevant as well as helpful for understanding the issue. In my view, this paper is a valuable contribution to the topic of equality.

In terms of potential improvements, I think the analysis could be more focused and engaging, and the concepts of 'equality of opportunity' and 'equality of outcome' could be analysed and explained more carefully.

First, the analysis could be more focused and engaging. While there is no doubt that the author disagrees with Douglas Murray, however, it is not always straightforward to see where exactly they disagree, and this makes it difficult to work out how the literature the author discusses as well as the account of her personal experience support her position. For example, the author ends the abstract of the paper with the statement that 'equality of opportunity, understood here as improved education, healthcare, childcare etc. and equality of outcome, are more rhetoric than reality'. But Douglas Murray could equally agree that equality of opportunity and equality of outcome are more rhetoric than reality, for he states, 'while the political left talks constantly of the need for equality and even equity ... the political right responds with a call for equality of opportunity, not equality of outcome. In fact both claims are almost certainly impossible locally and nationally, let alone globally.' (Murray 2020; Chapter 3) Moreover, Douglas Murray does not object to the value of equality per se. The Introduction of Murray (2020) asserts that, 'If the belief is that all people should be regarded as having equal value and be accorded equal dignity, then that may be all well and good.' In addition, Murray affirms that 'Equality in the eyes of God is a core tenet of the Christian tradition.' (Murray 2020; Chapter 3)

I am not suggesting that any reader is likely to come away with the impression that this paper holds the same position as Murray (2020). Nevertheless, it would be helpful if the author could be more specific on where exactly she disagrees with Douglas Murray, and to demonstrate how the literature she cites as well as her own personal experience support her case.

Second, it would be helpful to clarify what this paper means by 'equality of opportunity' and 'equality of outcome'. This point may be related to the first point, because it seems to me that the author of this paper and Douglas Murray (2020) are inclined towards different conceptions of equality of opportunity.

As Roemer (1998) points out, there are two conceptions of equality of opportunity prevalent today, one based on the non-discrimination principle while the other based on the level-the-playing-field principle. Among the works cited and

discussed in this paper, both conceptions are represented. For example, Sandel (2021) allows for the level-the-playing-field principle when he refers to equality of opportunity. Sandel states, 'Those who embraced the meritocratic project knew that true equality of opportunity required more than rooting out discrimination. It required leveling the playing field, so that people from all social and economic backgrounds could equip themselves to compete effectively in a knowledge-based, global economy.' (Sandel, 2021; Chapter 4) By contrast, Herrnstein and Murray (1994) focus on the non-discrimination principle, as does Murray (2020). This would explain why Herrnstein and Murray (1994) and Murray (2020) oppose affirmative actions.

Because of the co-existence of these two conceptions, what is referred to as 'equality of outcome' by some authors may in fact be very similar to what others understand as 'equality of opportunity'. For example, when Herrnstein and Murray (1994) are quoted and discussed on pages 11 and 12 in this paper, 'equality of outcome' in fact refers to policies based on the level-the-playing-field principle, which is the same as what Barack Obama, quoted on page 10 of this paper, refers to as 'equal opportunity to succeed'.

Another example illustrates this. Page 12 of the paper contains a quote from Jarret (2011), 'Laws and policies that attempt to promote equal opportunity by taking into account gender, race, disability or other equality strands in order to positively improve outcomes for these groups.' Although this sentence mentions 'improve outcomes', the concept discussed here is in fact 'equal opportunity'. This is because, under level-the-playing-field principle, equality of opportunity would imply that people of different backgrounds should attain similar distributions of outcomes; in other words, this can be described as 'equal (probabilistic) outcomes across different backgrounds', which is essentially the conception of equality of opportunity under the level-the-playing-field principle.

By contrast, what Obama refers to in that same sentence on page 10 as 'equal outcomes' is very close to what Sandel describes as 'equality of result'. Sandel (2021) distinguishes between 'equality of result' and 'equality of condition', or sometimes 'broad, democratic equality of condition'. While Sandel (2021) does not use the phrase 'equality of outcome', his conception of 'equality of condition' is very close to what many would describe as 'equality of outcome', which is not the same as what Herrnstein and Murray (1994) mean by the same phrase, namely, equality of opportunity based on level-the-playing-field principle.

Thus, what Herrnstein and Murray (1994) refer to as 'equality of opportunity' and 'equality of outcome' are really the two conceptions of equality of opportunity described by Roemer (1998). It is important to note that neither is related to inequality. To see this, consider a lottery in which different prizes are awarded. Equality of opportunity is about the extent to which the lottery tickets are fairly and equally distributed, while inequality is about the sizes of the prizes. These two aspects of the lottery are conceptually unrelated to each other. By contrast, what Sandel refers to as 'equality of condition', and what many would refer to as 'equality of outcome', is related to inequality.

Reading this paper gives the impression that the author is sympathetic towards the level-the-playing-field understanding of equality of opportunity, and to what Sandel describes as 'equality of condition'. However, when the phrase 'equality of outcome' appears in the paper, the author mainly follows Herrnstein and Murray's use of the term. As a result, the phrase 'equality of outcome' in this paper is no longer able to mean what Sandel refers to as 'broad, democratic equality

of condition’.

This matters because, by using ‘equality of opportunity’ and ‘equality of outcome’ to refer to the two conceptions of equality of opportunity respectively in the paper, some steps crucial to the argument might be missing. For example, consider the first two sentences of the Conclusion, ‘...all the available evidence points to the UK and America experiencing widening inequalities irrespective of the line taken (Pickett and Wilkinson, 2009.) The two-pronged approach to equality seeks to expand opportunity and eliminate discrimination through equality of outcomes.’ Here, the first sentence refers to the well-known fact of rising inequality in recent decades. However, if by ‘equality of outcome’ this paper means the level-the-playing-field type of equality of opportunity, then the connection between the first and the second sentence of the Conclusion – thus a crucial step in the argument – would appear to be missing. In other words, while rising inequality is an important concern, this paper would not have the necessary conceptual framework to bring it into discussion.

While distribution of opportunities and distribution of outcomes are unrelated to each other conceptually, however, it has been shown that empirically, inequality is negatively related to intergenerational mobility in some advanced economies, and this finding is known as the ‘Great Gatsby curve’ (Corak, 2013). Peng (2021) provides a theory to explain this phenomenon, showing that increases in inequality and reductions in mobility could be the joint outcome of the same underlying forces, which can include the nature of new technology or changes in policy environment. In other words, the same force that causes inequality to rise would also exert downward pressure on mobility. Thus, equality of opportunity and equality of outcome, instead of being rival objectives pursued separately by the political right and the political left, are in fact two sides of the same coin. Consequently, even if significant advances have been made in equalising the distribution of opportunities, widening inequality would continue to energise the quest for equal opportunity.

## References

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